

Popular press reveals controversy and misconceptions regarding quinoa and food security

By Charlotte Ambrozek and Martin Zorrilla, Department of International Agriculture and Rural Development, Cornell University and in collaboration with Bioversity International, Rome. The full article and references are available on request from Bioversity International: a.drucker@cgiar.org

Agricultural biodiversity is a strategic asset, particularly for rural people. Agricultural biodiversity has a role in increasing agricultural sustainability, maintaining resilience at the landscape level, facilitating the ability of communities to adapt to a changing climate, improving their diets and nutritional outcomes, and increasing their food security.



Harvested quinoa varieties, August 2009, community of Santiago de Okola, Camacho Province, Bolivia. Photo: Adam Drucker

Diverse traditional crop species can have higher nutritional values than some major crops, as well as having multiple uses for the household. Considering that in 2010-2012 there were 870 million people who went hungry, 840 million who were obese and 2 billion who suffered from at least one micronutrient deficiency, as many tools as possible to tackle this triple malnutrition challenge of hunger, obesity and nutrient deficiencies are needed.

Agrobiodiversity conservation represents a strategic opportunity to address the malnutrition challenge. Bioversity International's Payments for Agrobiodiversity Conservation Services scheme on quinoa in the Andes (<http://tinyurl.com/qxjlg9y>) is an example of one such mechanism to conserve agricultural biodiversity and improve food security outcomes.

The scheme focused on quinoa as a case study example as increasing demand for a few varieties of the Andean staple is leading to the displacement of many other varieties and the loss of crop diversity. Its high nutritional status as a "superfood" even led NASA to decree it ideal for missions in space. Quinoa is now so popular that the United Nations named 2013 the International Year of Quinoa. Yet some impacts of quinoa's popularity have become controversial in the popular press. A recent maelstrom of press articles on the "Quinoa Controversy" was ignited by a provocative piece in The Guardian entitled "Can Vegans Stomach the Unpalatable Truth About Quinoa".

The articles essentially argue that increased production of quinoa in Bolivia and Peru, the ancestral homeland of this Andean grain, has had negative social and environmental impacts on small farmers. This conclusion is based on alleged Bolivian government reports that showed that domestic quinoa consumption has decreased in recent years. Most authors attributed this drop to the price of quinoa, which has tripled in the past six years. Similarly, increased production and mechanization has been linked to ecosystem degradation and social conflict, particularly related to land access.

The “quinoa quandary” story was soon being carried by a dozen or so major news sites, and countless independent bloggers. We examined 42 such stories written between 2011-2013 in order to understand how the Western world interpreted this complex issue involving malnutrition, commodity markets, land degradation, and globalization.

Not only has the decreased-domestic-quinoa-consumption claim by the New York Times in 2011, been contradicted by later data suggesting that domestic consumption over the past four years has in fact tripled, but further misconceptions exist. The most common is that the high price of quinoa was responsible for malnutrition and poverty in the Andes. High prices of quinoa increased incomes for farmers, and actually inspired a generation of rural poor who had moved to the city to return to farming. Less sensationalist press stories revealed that while malnutrition was occurring among some families, it was more likely due to cultural reasons. Quinoa in the Andes has traditionally been a poor person’s food; as farmer incomes increased so did their tendency to replace quinoa with more western processed foods.

Another element missing from almost every press report was the opinion of Bolivian and Peruvian journalists and academics. Interestingly, our survey of Andean press sources found a very different take on the controversy. One thing became particularly clear: Bolivians and Peruvians are not begging Americans to stop eating quinoa. Many do not see high quinoa prices as a serious threat, given the economic benefits to farmers and the country as a whole. Rather Andean critics were often incredulous, with some expressing suspicion at the attention that the issue has received in the United States. One Bolivian news source suggested some US sources were calling for increased North American quinoa production merely in order to stimulate United States domestic quinoa production for their own market. Of the Bolivian news sources that have called attention to high rates of malnutrition among farmers, many point out that domestic quinoa consumption was historically low, prior to its rise in popularity in the West (in part as a result of practices during the colonial period).

However, the most striking difference between Andean and Western perspectives on the controversy lies in the proposed solutions. American journalists and bloggers almost universally emphasize consumer choice and how it should change, distilling the complex problem to a binary choice: eat quinoa or don’t eat quinoa. Andean sources instead recommend solutions to be achieved through policy changes and collective action. Articles often call for the government to prioritize domestic consumption, attempt to popularize quinoa consumption and subsidize its consumption in school lunch programs. To many Bolivians and Peruvians, increased quinoa demand is unquestionably a positive outcome, while negative side-effects are the result of poor agricultural policy and a lack of market regulation.

Whether in Bolivia or the United States, the increased price and production of quinoa has generated a strong reaction. The bubbling controversy reveals much in terms of how we view our food system and the global economy. It tells us that we, as Westerners, understand remarkably little about how our choices as consumers actually affect producers in other countries. It plays into a Global North vs. Global South view on those choices, and how people see avenues for change. Yet ultimately it tells us that people care, they care about the food they eat, and they care about the people who don’t get enough food to eat. The real question is how to turn that concern into increased food security for developing country farmers based on sustainable agricultural practices.

Newsflash

Seed regulation rejected by the EU Parliament



The European Parliament's Environment Committee has voted for the Commission to withdraw its proposal for a Regulation on agricultural seeds and other plant reproductive material. On 12th March 2014, after many protests, actions and policy debates, the European Parliament has adopted a legislative resolution, which clearly rejects the Commission's proposal with an overwhelming majority and calls the Commission to submit a new one. This is a crucial success for small and organic growers. The feared additional obstacles to the distribution of old and endangered varieties, such as needing official approval, are now swept from the European table, which now can continue to be spread with a wealth of diversity. Conservers and growers can breathe freely again. However, the issue is expected to raise its head again at the end of 2014 when new trade agreements are negotiated. For more information: www.seed-sovereignty.org/

International Solidarity Caravan for Seeds April 27 - May 1, 2014

The International Solidarity Caravan for Seeds is an event to inform and mobilize the public especially in the Mediterranean about the importance of the diversity of seeds and a free and unlimited exchange of them. On April 26, 2014 Peliti, a Greek organisation for the conservation of cultural plant varieties and SAVE partner will organize the 14th nationwide exchange celebration of local varieties. After that event, The International Solidarity Caravan for Seeds will start its journey off on April 27, 2014 from Peliti located in Messochori Paraneistiou in Greece, driving through Italy and finally arriving in Southern France (Le Mas d'Azil) for the International Seeds' Days' Festival organized by Kokopelli on 1st - 4th May 2014. The caravan will celebrate the rich diversity of seed and food in the Mediterranean countries, and will carry a message of Freedom for traditional seeds to the various areas it will travel through. The caravan will be held by cars or bus. Each participant should bear the cost of his/her travelling and hosting, including during the Festival in France; bus travellers would share the costs.

The Caravan is organized by: Peliti, www.peliti.gr ; Seed Freedom Global Movement, <http://seedfreedom.in> ; Navdanya Movement, www.navdanya.org and Kokopelli, <https://kokopelli-semences.fr> . You can register here: caravan@peliti.gr

Diversifying food and diets

The publication **Diversifying Food and Diets** revisits the role agricultural biodiversity can play in improving dietary diversity and health outcomes in a world where 868 million people are undernourished. Food system-based approaches that use local agricultural biodiversity to address diet-related health problems (such as cancer, diabetes and cardiovascular disease) by enhancing food availability and diet quality often fall outside the traditional scope of nutrition, and have been under-researched. As a consequence, there remains insufficient evidence to support well-defined, scalable agricultural biodiversity interventions that can be linked to improvements in nutrition outcomes. The book provides a set of lessons learned and a basis to help practitioners carry out similar efforts in other regional contexts. See: http://www.b4fn.org/the_book.html

Important dates (extract)

20-22 March: EkoSeedForum - European conference on organic plant breeding, organic seeds and crop biodiversity; in Poznan, Poland. Contact: jansen@ekoconnect.org, Web: <http://www.ekoconnect.org>

5-6 April: 4th International Re-enactment Fair; at Roman Villa Borg, Saarland, Germany; info@reenactmentmesse.de; Web: <http://www.reenactmentmesse.de/> (International Fair for Living History, Reenactment and Archaeotechnique)

7-25 April: Training programme on "Contemporary Approaches to Genetic Resources Conservation and Use", in Wageningen, The Netherlands. Web: www.wageningenur.nl/en/show/CDIcourse_contemporary_approaches_2014.htm

13-14 April: Natural & Organic Products; London, UK. <http://www.naturalproducts.co.uk>

26 April: 14th Pan-Hellenic Seed Exchange Festival, Messochori, Greece. www.peiliti.gr

22 May: International day for Biological Diversity; Web: <https://www.cbd.int/idb/2014/>

1-2 June: Organic Marketing Forum 2014, Warsaw, Poland. www.naturalproducts.co.uk

5-6 June: Sustainable Foods Summit 2014; Amsterdam, the Netherlands: Contact: info@sustainablefoodssummit.com, Web: <http://www.sustainablefoodssummit.com>

13-15 June: International food tasting of regional products at the Spring Festival in the Majjistral territory, Malta; Contact: info@leadermajjistral.eu

25-29 August: EAAP-Meeting in Copenhagen, Denmark, Web: <http://www.eaap2014.org>, Contact: eaap@discongress.com,

3-5 September: ECOMUSEUMS 2014, 2nd Int. Conference on Ecomuseums, Community Museums & Living Communities; Montalegre, Portugal. ecomuseums2014@greenlines-institute.org; Web: <http://www.ecomuseums2014.greenlines-institute.org>

16-19 Sept.: Forum Carpaticum 2014: "Local Responses to Global Challenges", in Lviv, Ukraine. Contact: ikruhlov@gmail.com, Web: <http://www.forumcarpaticum.org>

17-19 September: ForumAlpinum 2014: "Valorization, use and management of Alpine resources", at Darfo Boario Terme (Val Camonica), Italy. <http://www.forumalpinum.org>



18-20 Sept.: "Agrobiodiversity & Nature Protection", 8th Europ. Seminar on Agrobiodiversity and Annual Meeting of the European SAVE Network, at Lonjsko Polje Nature Park, Croatia. office@save-foundation.net, Web: www.save-foundation.net

25-29 Sept.: Europ. Federation of City Farms Conference 2014, Swansea, South Wales, UK; Contact: abigail@farmgarden.org.uk, Web: www.cityfarms.org/events/view/32

3-5 October: International Fair of Organic and Regional Food NATURA FOOD, Poland. Web: <http://www.naturafood.pl>

=> **Further Dates see:** <http://www.save-foundation.net/english/actual.htm#Events>